

Vol. 31, No. 4.

BULLETIN

April, 1937

of
**THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY
IN VIRGINIA**

THE HONOR SYSTEM IN COLLEGES

BY

JOSEPH ROY GEIGER

*Late Professor of Philosophy and Psychology
College of William and Mary*



WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA
1937

Entered at the Post Office at Williamsburg, Virginia, July 3, 1926, under act of August 24, 1912, as second-class matter.

Issued January, February, March, April, June, August, November.

Vol. 31, No. 4.

BULLETIN

April, 1937

of
**THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY
IN VIRGINIA**

THE HONOR SYSTEM IN COLLEGES

BY

JOSEPH ROY GEIGER

*Late Professor of Philosophy and Psychology
College of William and Mary*




WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA
1937

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The three contributions by the late Dr. Joseph Roy Geiger, professor of philosophy and psychology in the College of William and Mary, here reprinted, make a notable addition to the literature on the subject of the honor system in colleges. Frequent requests have been received for information in regard to the honor system in this College. It is believed, therefore, that the republication of these contributions by Dr. Geiger will be helpful to those in other colleges who wish information upon the subject and also to the present students and faculty of William and Mary. They are reproduced as they were first published, without any change in the text. There is some slight repetition, but it has seemed desirable not to make any change. They are republished here as an evidence of the exact attention and devotion which Dr. Geiger gave to the study of every phase of collegiate education.

E. G. SWEM,
Editor of the Bulletin of the College of William and Mary.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
LYRASIS Members and Sloan Foundation

THE HONOR SYSTEM IN COLLEGES¹

One of the priorities of the College of William and Mary, in which the writer of this paper happens to be a teacher of philosophy, is that of having been the first to formulate and adopt the "honor system" as a method of student government. Up to that time student government had been conceived and organized along lines closely analogous to a police system. In 1779, however, the faculty of the College of William and Mary, inspired by their ideal of democracy and by their faith in human nature, appointed a committee to draft a plan of college discipline which should be in keeping with the "liberal and magnanimous" attitude of the college toward its students. The plan reported by the Committee was adopted and has been in operation at William and Mary ever since. And from William and Mary it has spread to other institutions, in more or less modified forms, until to-day it is firmly entrenched in the student life of America.

The fundamental principle of this plan of college discipline which came to be known as the "honor system" was that of individual responsibility in matters involving the student's honor. The presupposition back of it was that "he who cannot be held to do his duty but by base and slavish motives can never do honor to his instructors" and that "such a system as keeps up a sense of responsibility to society at large is most conducive to high excellence." (Cf. Extracts from Addresses of Judge Nathaniel Beverley Tucker, Professor of Law in the College of William and Mary, in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. XVIII, pp. 165-171.) In the words of a professor of law in the College during the earlier years of its history: "He (the student) comes to us a gentleman. As such we receive him and treat him and resolutely refuse to know him in any other character. He is not harassed with petty regulations; he is not insulted and annoyed by impertinent surveillance. Spies and informers have no countenance among us. We receive no accusation but from the conscience of the accused; and should he be even capable of prevarication or falsehood, we admit no proof of the fact." (Ib., p. 165.) Not only was the student put on his own responsibility in matters of honor, and more particularly in matters involving his pledged word regarding any of his actions, but he was allowed, with a few exceptions, to judge for him-

¹Reprinted from *International Journal of Ethics*, Vol. XXXII, No. 4, July, 1922.

self what were to be considered matters of honor. "While nothing is required of him (the student) but attention to his studies," says the same authority quoted above, "nothing is forbidden but dueling, which might be fatal to his life, and gambling and drunkenness and tavern haunting, which must be pernicious to his health and morals." (Ib., p. 169.) And finally, the enforcement of the "scanty, but important code" thus imposed by the faculty was "committed to the student's sense of duty and interest," while "academic censures were only resorted to in extreme and rare cases." (Cf. Ib., p. 169.)

Now, it is not the purpose of this paper to eulogize the honor system as a method of college discipline, or to attempt any critical evaluation of it. Perhaps no one would deny that it has been worth while. Certainly, the idealism back of it and the faith in human nature which it presupposes are influences which must profoundly affect the characters of those who come under its sway. About the only way to make people responsible in matters of morals is to induce them to practice responsibility in such matters. Nevertheless, the most enthusiastic advocates of the honor system must recognize that in practice it has not always worked as effectively as its authors expected that it would. It has been found necessary, wherever it has been in operation, to supplement it with a system of student organization and self-government which, with its councils, its investigations, its court-like trials, and its rules for binding the student to become an informer on his fellow student, belies its assumption that the "honor" of the individual can be depended on to control his conduct without any restraints or penalties externally applied. Furthermore, it has been found that the student's "sense of honor" frequently fails to include within its scope matters which involve in a vital way the welfare of the college and of the student himself. In such cases, one of two things has happened: the standards in question have been written into the students' recognized code of honor by the authorities of the college; or these standards have been the subjects of legislation and discipline from the maintenance and enforcement of which the students have been more or less excluded. Needless to say, both these procedures are foreign to the spirit and intent of the honor system as originally conceived.

But if the honor system has in practice failed to measure up to the expectations of its authors, to what has this failure been due? Why has it been necessary to modify and supplement it in such fundamental ways? Numerous reasons, more or less superficial, and varying from locality to locality, might be cited as explanations. Back of all these

explanations, however, is the fact that the individual which the honor system presupposes and with which it pretends to deal, is artificial and unreal. The student who is inherently a "gentleman" or a "man of honor," or who is "morally responsible" in whatever situation he may be placed, is as unpsychological as the "sinner" presupposed by medieval theology or the pleasure-seeking individual presupposed by eighteenth century ethics and economics. These preconceptions of the student do not sufficiently take account of the social context in which the moral sense and ethical traits of the individual develop and express themselves. More particularly, a "sense of honor," or "moral responsibility," is a function of a social context involving numerous and complex factors; and any system of control whose application depends on the presence of these traits must include within its *modus operandi* a clear insight into what these factors are and adequate methods of making them effective.

This discussion is more concerned with the former of these two conditions than with the latter. Our problem is: What are some of the factors which must be operative if the honor system is successfully applied? It is obvious that some of these factors reach back into the former environment, and even back into the heredity of the student. How the student will behave when put on his honor in college, how he will respond when thrown on his own responsibility, will depend in part on the hereditary and environmental forces which have combined to make him what he is. And this fact sets a limit to what can be accomplished in the way of student discipline through the honor system. The honor system can never be one hundred per cent effective because it has to deal with the student who is handicapped by defective heredity and inadequate training as well as with the student whose heredity and training predispose him to respond to its demands. Aside from these factors which reach back into the heredity and early environment of the student, however, the conditions on which the applicability of the honor system depends are not impossible of realization, however remote they may at times seem to be. Let us see what these conditions are:

In the first place, the standards of honor within the scope of action in which the honor system is to be applied must be well defined and generally recognized by the rank and file of the students. And in this connection it is important to distinguish between the theoretical scope of the honor system and the actual scope within which it is practical to apply it. More particularly, the concept, "Honor," which is fundamental to the honor system, originally meant "to esteem" or "to have high regard for." One of the earliest forms of social control

was that of praise and blame. Men were praised, esteemed, honored who performed the actions essential to the group's welfare in the most excellent manner. On the other hand, men whose actions either contributed nothing to the group's welfare, or were inimical thereto, were blamed or ridiculed. Because man's desire for praise and aversion to blame or ridicule is one of the most deep-seated and universal dispositions constituting his nature, honor and dishonor, as reflecting the attitudes of the group toward its members, were from the first powerful instruments of social control. Later, "honor" came to stand for those traits of character which were most honorable, *i. e.*, most worthy of being honored or praised, as contributing the most to the common welfare; and dishonor came to denote those traits of a contrary nature.

Now, if the view set forth above is correct, it must be obvious that "honor" is a relative term. It always connotes those standards of actions which, from the point of view of the welfare of a given group, are most worth while, *i. e.*, are most conducive to the ends or purpose for which that group exists; the particular traits of character denoted by it in any particular group at any particular time, however, will depend on the character of the group in question and on the character of the vital interests and activities of the group. For example, one of the precursors of our modern state was the military or warrior group. The traits most essential to the purposes for which this group existed were courage, loyalty, and chivalry. These traits, therefore, constituted the "honor" of the members of this group. Another precursor of the state was the "town" or trading group. Among the members of this group, "honor" came to designate such things as industriousness, sobriety, honesty, and fairness, because these were just the traits on whose presence and operation the welfare of craftsmen and traders depended. Incidentally, it is the imperfect assimilation of these two groups one to the other in our national life of today that accounts for much of the conflict and confusion centering about current moral standards.

But what is the bearing of all this on the problem of the scope and operation of the honor system? Well, the most obvious implication would seem to be that the "honor" of those who live under this system has reference primarily, not to the abstract moral traits of certain individuals who just happen to be attending the same college and living on the same campus, but rather to those concrete standards of action which are most essential to the welfare of a college community of which such individuals are members. This being the case, it would seem arbitrary to single out some one trait of character as constituting "honor" under the honor system, however "honorable" the trait may

be in non-academic groups, or even in academic groups, for that matter. To say that the honor system should operate only with reference to lying or cheating in relation to class-room activities is to presuppose a narrow and abstract conception of the vital interests and activities of a college group. These interests and activities are numerous and complex. They contemplate the welfare of the college community itself and the welfare of all those groups of which the college community is a fusion. Any standard of action, then, which implicates the welfare of the college community or the more remote forms of welfare represented thereby is, according to our analysis, theoretically, at least, a matter of honor. And the first problem which the leaders in student government must face is precisely this: What interests and activities are fundamental to our welfare as students and as members of a college community? For, having determined what it is that constitutes their welfare, they will then be in a position to consider a further problem, viz.: What standards of action are calculated to best promote our welfare thus defined? The proper solution of this problem should define the theoretical scope of the honor system. Whether all the standards of action included within this scope can be treated as matters of honor and dealt with accordingly is a practical problem to be worked out in the light of practical considerations.

These considerations have to do with the extent to which any action, however much it may implicate the welfare of the college community, is definitely recognized by the students as being a matter of honor. For the effectiveness of a standard or an ideal in controlling the behavior of the individual requires the public opinion of the whole body of students to reinforce it. It frequently happens that because of pressure brought to bear by college authorities, or because of the personal influence of student leaders, standards are injected into the code of honor prevailing in a college concerning which the opinion and sentiment of the student body as a whole have not become crystallized. In such cases, the enforcement of the standards in question is impossible. And the evil effects growing out of situations of this kind are far-reaching. It isn't merely that standards of action vital to the welfare of the college community remain unenforced; this failure on the part of the student body to enforce any part of its code has a tendency to undermine the students' self-respect, to weaken their morale, and to cause them to become indifferent to those standards in their code about which they really have had convictions. To attempt to apply the honor system to actions which are not as yet considered as matters of honor by the rank and file of the students, then, is one of the surest ways to make it ineffective. On the other hand, as soon as any action is

generally recognized as affecting in a vital way the welfare of the student body or the good name of the college, the extension of the honor system to apply to that action is likely to be regarded as a matter of course. For example, a body of students might not recognize drinking as being generally dishonorable, in which case, they would be unwilling to be placed on their honor with reference to it; and yet, they might be easily made to see that drinking during college dances or just previously thereto, is to be regarded as pernicious, and hence, dishonorable, and is to be dealt with accordingly. Or, a student body as a whole might have no adverse convictions with regard to smoking, keeping late hours, or indulging in other forms of dissipation; and yet these same students might think it entirely appropriate for a squad of athletes during training to pledge themselves to refrain from these practices and might be willing to extend their code of honor to enforce such a pledge.

And this suggests a second prerequisite to an effective application of the honor system in any college; namely, moral leadership within the student body of that college. For while it is true that the effectiveness of the honor system at any one time depends on restricting its application to those actions which are regarded by the student public as matters of honor, yet if it is to function adequately over a period of years, the students' code must adapt itself to changing conditions and must assimilate new standards and ideals as these articulate themselves in the give and take of college life. To this end there must be leaders gifted with insight, courage, and tact to mediate to the student public recognition and appreciation of such standards and ideals. But, unfortunately, a sufficient premium is not always placed on moral leadership in the average American college. And this is due very largely to the disproportionate prestige and influence enjoyed by certain interests within the life of the college. The overtowering importance attached to intercollegiate athletics is a case in point. The competition for athletic supremacy among the colleges is such that the exceptional athlete commands a following and exerts an influence that is out of all proportion to his real qualifications for leadership. In student elections, for example, involving positions of trust and responsibility whose successful administration depends in no sense on physical prowess, the athlete, merely because he is such, too frequently is favored over his non-athletic competitor, however well qualified for the office in question the latter may be in all respects that matter. It is not implied, of course, that the athlete is necessarily lacking in real leadership; much less that his athletic interests and abilities are *per se* inimical to such leadership. The point is simply that the disproportionate

importance attached to athletics in the student's scale of values has the effect of narrowing the circles within the student body from which leaders are selected and of limiting the quality of leadership thus secured.

And the prestige and influence enjoyed by the fraternity idea in college operates in somewhat the same way. The college fraternity is, doubtless, its own excuse for existing. But inasmuch as it is the college community that makes the fraternity as such possible, it would seem to be a matter of simple justice for the fraternity to repay the debt thus incurred in whatever way is most appropriate to it. And when the fraternity's standards are what they should be, and when these standards are lived up to in the selection and training of its members, it should be in a position to repay this debt many times over in the quality and quantity of leadership which it furnishes. As a matter of fact, however, the fraternity frequently prefers the short and easy method of politics in the bad sense as a means of furnishing its quota of leaders. Men are put forward and supported for offices for no better reason than that they are representatives of fraternities and as such are somehow felt to be worthier of trust and responsibility than their less fortunate opponents. And the fraternity is not wholly, or even primarily, to blame for the restriction that is thus placed upon the sources of student leadership. The fault lies with the scale of values embedded within the traditions of American college life. The more ultimate reasons for the anomalies exhibited in this scale of values reflect conditions which reach beyond the confines of the college as such and raise problems with which this paper cannot concern itself. Suffice it to say that American colleges are sadly in need of moral leadership among their students, in connection with student government, as well as in other connections, and that before this need can be adequately met, there must be a "transvaluation of values" at certain important points within our college tradition.

But there is at least one other thing that is needed if the honor system is to achieve its greatest usefulness in our colleges: there must be more sympathetic and more intelligent co-operation on the part of the college authorities, and more particularly on the part of instructors. Instructors must come to realize once for all that the student's "sense of honor" is a relative matter; that "moral responsibility" is nothing more nor less than the capacity on the part of the individual to respond morally to certain stimulating conditions. That the individual is possessed of such a capacity is to his credit; and to believe in and depend on this capacity in relation to the control of his conduct, is to the credit of those who share these attitudes. But this

should not blind us to the fact that the student's moral capacities must be appropriately and adequately stimulated if they are to issue into moral conduct. And in this connection the instructor and other college authorities owe the student a very definite obligation; they owe it to him, as far as in them lies, to create and maintain conditions favorable to honorable, gentlemanly behavior. Character doesn't grow in a vacuum. Neither does it thrive under conditions which place too great a strain on its powers of resistance. If it is to bear its best fruit, it must be planted in a congenial soil and must be nurtured by influences which reinforce its potentialities for good. The observation of the writer has been that wherever the honor system prevails too much is taken for granted in the way of abstract honor and a ready-made moral sense on the part of the students, and especially on the part of those students who are immature.

The irregular conditions under which delinquent examinations or tests are sometimes given reflect these preconceptions all too clearly. It is assumed that because a group of students may be trusted not to cheat while taking a test without supervision, any single member of this group may be similarly trusted under similar circumstances. But isn't such an assumption a case of the logical fallacy of division? The sense of honor ascribed to members of the group belongs to them not so much as separate and distinct individuals; it belongs to them *as members of the group* whose common interests, ideals, and traditions are just the conditions which are calculated to evoke and encourage moral responsibility or honorable behavior. It frequently happens that certain individuals share these interests, ideals, and traditions to such an extent as not to need the presence and support of their group, or any part of it, in situations involving their honor. And whenever an instructor gives a test to a student alone in his class room, he must no doubt assume that this is the case. But to give a student a test to take in his own room and at his convenience; or to give him a series of problems in mathematics, let us say, to be solved during a period of several days without aid from any source whatever, and to permit him to know that the results of his work are to have a crucial bearing on his class standing would almost seem to be a case of tempting providence. And the instructor who views the matter in this light and governs himself accordingly does not thereby show himself lacking in idealism, or faith in human nature. Neither does he intentionally or unintentionally impugn the actuality of student honor or do violence to the principles underlying the honor system. He merely recognizes that the honor of students, as well as of human beings in general, is not an abstract, ready-made trait which operates automatically in

any situation regardless of circumstances; but that this trait is a function of numerous and complex factors, and is, therefore, always relative to such factors. His insistence that work involving the student's honor shall be done under controlled conditions is rather an expression of his interest in and regard for the particular student with whom he may be dealing and of his determination that this student shall have the benefit of just those circumstances which are most favorable to the right kind of response to the expectations of the student's instructors, his fellow students, and his own better self.

We are familiar with the dictum, accepted in some quarters, that a government owes it to its people to force them to be free. No doubt it is a contradiction in terms to speak of forcing a people to be moral. And it is possible that in some respects we are now reaping the fruits of not having sufficiently distinguished the spheres of legislation and morals. At any rate, this is the belief of many thoughtful and conscientious people. On all sides we hear it preached that interference and prohibitions will never make moral citizens. But this ethical brand of laissez faire can easily be carried too far. It is the opinion of the writer that it is carried too far in many cases in relation to our college discipline. And if this statement is warranted at all it would seem to apply not only to class-room matters in the manner described above, but also to matters of personal morals. College authorities cannot force their charges to be moral, but they certainly owe it to them to create and maintain conditions as favorable as possible to moral behavior. A fair chance of being his best self is the least that the student can demand of his college; and until this chance is afforded him, it is worse than mockery to depend on his "honor" or "moral sense" as means of controlling his behavior.

THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF THE HONOR SYSTEM²

In colleges where the honor system serves as the basis of student government, scepticism as to its necessity or as to the possibility of maintaining it is sometimes expressed in terms of the following dilemma: If those who live under the honor system are possessed of a high sense of honor, the system is unnecessary; and if those who live under it are not possessed of a high sense of honor, it is impossible; so that it must be either unnecessary or impossible. Upholders of the honor system seek to avoid the force of this dilemma by "escaping between the horns." More specifically, it is contended that the alternatives proposed are not mutually exclusive, inasmuch as the student body in question is composed of both honorable and dishonorable types of students; so that, if only the former are in the majority, the honor system can and ought to be maintained to the gradual elimination of those who are unfit to live under it. There is, however, another possible method of meeting this attack on the honor system. It may be argued that the alternatives of honorable or dishonorable student bodies are not only not mutually exclusive, but are not exhaustive, inasmuch as there is a third possibility, namely, a student body composed of those who are neither entirely honorable nor dishonorable, but composed rather of those who are in process of becoming honorable or dishonorable, as the case might be; and that with reference to any actual student body, made up as it is of such immature and unformed persons, the function of the honor system is not only to regulate, by eliminating the unfit, but more especially, to educate, by helping to create an environment which will be most favorable to the development of honorable traits and honorable behavior.

Now these two methods of meeting the scepticism of those who question the necessity or the possibility of the honor system may be said to be typical of two more or less distinct conceptions of the nature and function of this institution. One of these conceptions is that the honor system is primarily, if not exclusively, a form of student self-government; and the other is that, because no form of self-government can be permanently adequate unless it is educative as well as regulative in its effects, the honor system must aim at producing such effects in the characters of those who live under it if it is to regulate their conduct in a permanently effective manner. The former of these

²Reprinted from *School and Society*, Vol. XXI, No. 540, May 2, 1925.

two conceptions was stressed by the writer in a paper which appeared some time ago entitled, "The Honor System in Colleges."³ In the present paper it is proposed to emphasize the latter conception in an effort to show why the honor system must be educative as well as regulative, and to suggest some of the means by which this more general effect may be secured.

For a brief statement concerning the meaning of the honor system as conceived by its founders, the modifications it has undergone in the course of its history and the reasons therefor, and the conditions which must be present and operative in student life if the system is to function effectively in its present form, the reader is referred to the paper just cited. We shall begin our present discussion by distinguishing between two connotations of the term "honor," as used in connection with the honor system, which have not always been clearly distinguished by those who have thought on this matter. In the first place, then, "honor" may be said to have an ethical connotation in that it refers to those standards of action which are considered by the members of any student community to be indispensable to the promotion of interests regarded as vital to the welfare of that community. But, in the second place, the term may be said to have a psychological connotation in that it refers to the traits in the characters of those who make up the student community which dispose them to conform to such standards of action as being "matters of honor."

Now the standards of action regarded by any generation of students as being "matters of honor" may or may not be truly objective, that is, completely representative of their best interests; but in either case the "sense of honor" which students bring with them to the college will, on the whole, fall short of the requirements of the honor code under which they must live. The reasons for this are obvious. The student's "sense of honor" is not inherited; it is acquired. And it is acquired in some specific environment. It is, therefore, relative to that environment. But the environments in which students are reared and in which they acquire the "sense of honor" they bring with them to the college differ from the college environment in two ways. There is, in the first place, what might be called a quantitative difference in that the ideals of the former may be better or more than those of the latter. And, in the second place, there is a qualitative difference in that the two sets of ideals have developed with reference to dissimilar situations and types of interests. In either case, there-

³The International Journal of Ethics, Vol. 32, No. 4, July, 1922. Reprinted in the present Bulletin of the College of William and Mary, pages 5-13.

fore, influences must be brought to bear on the immature student to modify, improve or expand his "sense of honor" in appropriate ways.

Our contention is that the honor system is, or at least should be, one of the educative influences thus brought to bear on the immature student. This is possibly not the orthodox conception of the honor system. The orthodox conception would seem to be that the honor system is essentially a regulative instrument and incidentally a device for separating the sheep from the goats, or a sort of sieve for sifting out the good grain from the worthless chaff. The presupposition lying back of such a view of the honor system is a static conception of human nature, and more especially of those elements in human nature which constitute a "sense of honor." But for an educational institution to subscribe to a system of student control which is itself not essentially educational in its aims and effects, and to deal with students as being immature and undeveloped with reference to knowledge and yet as finished products with respect to morals, would seem to be a contradiction in terms.

And so we conclude that the college community is logically committed to the conception of the honor system as being essentially educative and not merely regulative (or shall we say, eliminative?) in its intent and result. What differences will this conception make in the administration of the honor system where it is consciously grasped and put into practice? In other words, how shall the honor system function as an institution whose aim it is to help create an environment which is favorable to the development of the sort of honor required of one who is to successfully conform to its code?

Well, in the first place, the publicity given by student officers and leaders to the standards upheld by the honor system can be made something more than perfunctory explanation or warning. Too often such publicity has aimed only at putting the new student on notice, so to speak: here are the ideals of the student community: let the new student take them or leave them, along with the consequences. A rather formal sense of justice (and, should we not add, something akin to smug self-righteousness?) requires that the inevitable delinquents, when once their violations of the honor code have proved them to have been "devils from the beginning," shall not be able to plead ignorance of the law! It is not contended that any effort should be made to defend or justify these ideals; the freshman should, of course, be given to understand that he must acknowledge and abide by them if he is to share the privilege of living in the college community. Nevertheless, this information can, and should be conveyed in such a manner as to establish in the freshman's mind associations and attitudes

which will make his acceptance of the honor code something more than a meaningless formality. Constructive publicity, then, as a substitute for perfunctory explanations and warnings is one way in which the honor system can be rendered truly educative in its effects.

And there are various other methods of a similar nature by which this desirable end can be brought about. For example, the freshman's acknowledgment and acceptance of the honor code can also be made less perfunctory. When a student matriculates in a college where the honor system is in operation, there is an implied agreement on his part to live under this system and to uphold its standards. But this formality might be supplemented by a solemn and impressive ceremony, conducted by student representatives, on which occasion all new matriculates would be initiated into the honor system, as it were, taking upon themselves such vows in such terms as would be appropriate to the dramatic and emotional features of the situation. The psychological effect of a ceremony of this sort is obvious.

Again, a more discriminating and intelligent use of the "pledge" can be encouraged with good effect. Certainly, the student should be made to realize that the pledge he is required to take creates no obligation on his part, but, on the contrary, is intended to remind him of the obligation which already exists. Furthermore, it would seem desirable that the wording of the pledge be appropriate to the kind of work it is meant to cover. A blanket pledge might not afford the student in a given situation the best chance of being honorable, in so far as his being honorable in that situation depends on his reminding himself, through the pledging of his word, of his obligation to be fair.

Another important matter in this same connection is that of the circumstances under which tests and examinations are given. One sometimes hears it argued that where the honor system is really in operation it does not make any difference whether the student is taking a test alone in his own room, or in the class-room in company with others; in either case, he is "on his honor" and if he is honorable at all, he will be honorable regardless of the situation in which he finds himself. The fallacy in such a contention has been exposed by the writer elsewhere.⁴ Here we need only remind ourselves of the basic assumption of our discussion, namely, that the honor system has to do, not with students who are already completely honorable or dishonorable, but, so far as under-classmen, at least, are concerned, with immature, unformed persons who are in process of acquiring these qualities of

⁴*Id.*, p. 407. In this present Bulletin of the College of William and Mary, see pages 12, 13.

character. As applied to the taking of examinations and tests by these immature and unformed persons, the honor system should not only operate to control and restrain, where this is possible, and otherwise, to detect and expose; but also to provide the sort of situation in which the immature student will, under the influence of social suggestions, acquire the habit of conducting himself in an honorable way. "Social facilitation" has been shown to be a very real factor in influencing the intellectual operations of the individual in a group;⁵ it could doubtless be shown to be just as influential in modifying and controlling the individual's moral reactions. The administration of the honor system cannot afford to ignore this important principle in social behavior.

But practically no one questions the desirability of conducting tests and examinations in a regular, uniform manner; our reference to it was merely to emphasize what is often overlooked, namely, the educative effect on the individual of class-room work so conducted. What practically every one who has not seriously considered the matter does question, however, is the desirability of the presence of the instructor while the test or examination is going on. And yet, in keeping with our assumption as to the moral immaturity of the student, and as to the educative effects of the honor system when administered in a manner appropriate to this moral immaturity, especially as this applies to the conduct of tests and examinations, must we not regard the presence of the instructor in or adjacent to the class-room as a factor belonging to the total situation through a reaction to which the student gets the habit of self-reliance and finally the sense of fairness and honor? Two things which might militate against a student's depending entirely on himself while taking an examination are a lack of class-room decorum and a possible ambiguity in the wording of some question in the examination which needs to be cleared up. In the first case, promiscuous comment could easily suggest to the student some item of knowledge which was not his own, but which, under the circumstances, it would be peculiarly difficult for him not to use. And in the second case, such an informal state of affairs could easily influence him to ask other students for enlightenment on the ambiguity in question, which enlightenment, when given, might put him in possession of information to which he is not entitled, but will, nevertheless, make use of. In neither case would the student intend to be dishonest; and at the time he might not even be conscious of any dishonesty. The effect, however, would be to dull the keen edge of his

⁵Burnham, H. H., "The group as a stimulus to mental activity," *Science*, N. S., 1910, XXXI, pp. 761-67; Allport, F. H., "Social Psychology," pp. 261-91.

good intentions and incline him in subsequent situations to be less and less scrupulous until he had definitely acquired the habit of being dishonest in that kind of a situation. But the presence of the instructor in the room from time to time would obviously safeguard the student thus circumstanced and so would prove a favorable factor in the total situation conditioning the formation of his habits and traits.

Still another way in which the honor system can be made to minister to the moral education of the immature student is for the older students to take more seriously their obligations to report such violations of the honor code as come to their attention. This is the point at which the honor system is most apt to break down. The feeling which some students and even some faculty members have is that to pretend to uphold the honor of the college community by requiring its members to do what they regard as a dishonorable thing, that is, to "spy" or "tattle," is an anomaly. Several considerations may be urged, however, against such an attitude. In the first place, this attitude is based on a false analogy between civil society and the college community. In civil society there are agencies whose sole duty it is to detect and expose wrongdoing. To be sure, the existence of such agencies does not absolve the citizen from all moral nor, indeed, from all legal responsibility in this connection. But on the whole, the welfare of civil society is best promoted where every citizen "attends to his own business." To "attend to one's own business," therefore, is, under ordinary circumstances, an "honorable" trait so far as the citizen is concerned. Now the college community, living under the honor system, is like civil society in a democratic state in that it sets up certain machinery through which it proposes to govern itself. It is unlike civil society, however, in that the personnel of its governmental machinery are primarily students, and so, in the nature of the case, cannot be exclusively depended on to detect and expose wrongdoing. Theirs is the duty to investigate and administer punishment in such cases as come under their personal observations or are reported to them by others. For the most part, the rank and file of students themselves must be responsible for and take the initiative in calling to account those whose misconduct is dishonorable, and thus strikes at the foundations of college life.

The tradition that to "spy" or to "tattle" is not an honorable thing to do has a more primitive basis, however, than this analogy between the college community and civil society. It reaches back into the earliest training of the individual as a member of the family and the elementary school. But there is no analogy between these groups and the college community that justifies carrying over into the latter

this tradition against concerning oneself with the wrongdoing of others. Neither the family nor the elementary school pretends to be a self-governing body; authority is vested in and is exercised by the parents and the teachers, respectively. And on the whole, parents and teachers find it easier to administer their authority in an effective and equitable manner when there is a minimum of "spying" and "tattling."

The student, however, is not required to be a "spy" or a "busy-body." He is merely required to report such cases of misconduct as come under his observation while engaged in his own affairs. He is not at liberty to withhold information of such violations of the honor code for the reason that this information rightfully belongs to the student council to whom he, as one who has elected to live under the honor system, has delegated the duty of upholding the honor code. The fact that the knowledge in question was not gained as a result of any effort on his part, but, on the contrary, was stumbled on, so to speak, as one might pick up a purse lost by another, does not in any way affect his obligation in the matter. The knowledge is not his; it belongs to others. And to keep it locked up in his own mind is no more defensible morally than it would be for one to pocket money he had found with no attempt to identify its rightful owner.

A discussion of the honor system as a means of education would not be complete without some reference to the character and significance of the punishment that is administered under it. Shall the punishment imposed for violations of the honor code themselves be made to minister to the development of honorable students? And to this end, shall first offenders be punished in some way that will permit them to remain in school and thus have an opportunity to rectify their faults? The obvious objection to the adoption of such a policy in institutions where expulsion from college is the only penalty inflicted for dishonorable conduct is that it would have just the opposite effect to that intended. To adopt such a policy would have the effect of putting the student on notice that he can always take a chance on being "caught" the first time. It would encourage him to feel that he can postpone the mending of his ways until after his first offense. And in view of the fact that there is always a possibility of his "getting by" without being detected in his wrongdoings, his "first offense," when finally discovered and dealt with, would be apt to have back of it a habit of misconduct which is so firmly fixed as to be incapable of rectification, in spite of such leniency as would be shown him.

Whether extenuating circumstances, including the circumstance of a first offense, should ever be taken into consideration in determining guilt and in fixing penalties is, however, a question which stu-

dent leaders must seriously face. The lack of time and the immaturity of judgment on the part of those composing student governing bodies have been urged as reasons for opposing this innovation. It must be remembered, however, that in cases of discipline, not considered matters of honor, and where the penalty of expulsion does not automatically apply, student representatives do consume considerable time and do rely on their own judgment in administering punishment. It would not seem unreasonable, therefore, to believe them capable of meeting the demands which the more serious breaches of the honor code would make on them in these respects. At any rate, the matter is worth considering because of the bearing it has on the question of the extent to which the honor system can be made to minister to the moral development of the students living under it.

We believe that if the honor system is administered in accordance with or in the spirit of some such principles as have been suggested in this paper, it will minister to the moral development of those who live under it. No doubt, there are those who will say that student morals, and especially student honor, cannot be developed under a system which is essentially regulative and compulsory in its mode of operation. Either a sense of honor, it will be contended, is already a part of the make-up of the student, in which case, the honor code is simply a declaration of the standards to which, as a matter of course, he intends to conform; or it is not a part of his make-up, in which case, the honor code is a formulation of the standards to which he will be compelled to conform or withdraw from college: under no circumstance is the student ever "trained" to be honorable. In contrast with this point of view, our own conviction is that, whenever or wherever the student comes to be possessed of his sense of honor, he acquires it under the pressure of conditions which involve control and discipline. If the pressure exerted by the control and discipline to which he is subjected before coming to college is such that it does not need to be supplemented in any way, well and good; otherwise additional pressure is necessary. Furthermore, only those standards of honor which have articulated themselves in the experience of the student during the process of living under the honor system as an instrument of control and discipline, or under the stress of analogous conditions, can serve him as significant ideals. And finally, these standards of honor, although accepted and practiced at first under the influence of social suggestion and social pressure, come sooner or later to be appreciated in their broader significance in relation to social values and so to be regarded as sacred and inviolable.

SOME MISCONCEPTIONS OF THE HONOR SYSTEM⁶

I assure you that I consider it a privilege and an honor to address you on this occasion. I particularly appreciate talking to such a large group of students about student government. And it has seemed to me that I can make no better use of the time set apart for my discussion than to present for your consideration what I regard as certain misconceptions of the honor system.

Among my many duties as a teacher of philosophy is the very delightful one of conducting each year a course in logic. On one occasion while conducting this course I assigned to groups of students the task of working out and bringing in illustrations of the dilemma as a form of argument, and the various ways of meeting this particular form of argument. The dilemma brought in by one of these groups was most interesting. It had to do with the honor system and was designed to show that this institution ought to be abolished. As I recall it, the argument went somewhat as follows:

If those who live under the honor system are possessed of a high sense of honor, the system is unnecessary and ought therefore to be abolished; and if those who live under this system do not possess a high sense of honor, it is impossible to maintain the system, and it ought therefore to be abolished. But those who live under the honor system either do or do not possess a high sense of honor. So that in either case this institution ought to be abolished, either because it is unnecessary or because it is impossible to maintain it.

All of which sounded very formidable, indeed. But the arguments advanced to meet this formidable dilemma were quite equal to the occasion. On the one hand, it was contended that the alternatives proposed by the dilemma are not mutually exclusive, inasmuch as a student body is, as a matter of fact, composed of both honorable and dishonorable types of students, and that if only the former are in the majority, the honor system can and ought to be maintained to the gradual elimination of those who are unfit to live under it. On the other hand, it was argued that the alternatives of honorable or dishonorable student bodies are not only not mutually exclusive, but that these alternatives are not exhaustive, inasmuch as there is a third possibility, namely, a student body composed of those who are neither entirely honorable nor dishonorable, but composed, rather, of those who

⁶An address delivered at the Convocation exercises, September 23, 1927, in Walter Reed Hall, State Teachers College, Harrisonburg. Reprinted from *The Virginia Teacher*, December, 1927.

are in process of becoming honorable or dishonorable, as the case may be; and that with reference to any actual student body, made up as it is of such immature and unformed persons, the function of the honor system is not only to regulate, by eliminating the unfit, but also and more especially to educate by helping to create an environment which is most favorable to the development of honorable traits and honorable behavior.

Now it occurred to me as I considered the pros and cons of this debate, that these two ingenuous methods of meeting what was no doubt a purely academic attack on the honor system are typical of two more or less distinct conceptions of the nature and function of this institution. One of these conceptions is that the honor system is primarily, if not exclusively, a form of student government; and the other is that, because no form of self-government can be permanently adequate unless it is educative as well as regulative in its effects, the honor system must aim at producing such effects in the characters of those who live under it if it is to regulate their conduct in a permanently effective manner. It is the former of these two conceptions, namely, the conception of the honor system as being essentially regulative rather than educative in its intent, that I regard as a misconception. And it is this misconception of the honor system that I wish you to consider first.

And let us begin by distinguishing between two meanings of the term "honor" as used in connection with the honor system, which have not always been carefully distinguished by those who have thought on this matter. In the first place, then, "honor" may be said to have an ethical connotation in that it refers to those standards of action which are considered by the members of any student community as being indispensable to the welfare, if not to the very existence, of that community. But the term may also be said to have a psychological connotation in that it refers to the traits in the characters of those who make up the student community which dispose them to conform to such standards of action as being matters of honor, and which we, therefore, think of as constituting their "sense of honor."

Now the standards of action regarded by any generation of students as being matters of honor may or may not be truly objective, that is, truly representative of their best interests; but in either case the sense of honor which many students bring with them to college will on the whole fall short of the requirements of the honor code under which they must live. The reasons for this are obvious. The student's sense of honor is not inherited; it is acquired. And it is acquired in some specific environment. It is, therefore, relative to that environment.

But the environments in which students are reared and in which they acquire the sense of honor they bring with them to college are apt to differ from the college environment in one or the other, or in both of two respects. On the one hand the ideals of the former may be inferior to those of the latter. On the other hand the two sets of ideals may simply be different in that they have developed with reference to dissimilar situations and types of interest. And in any case, influences must be brought to bear on the immature student to improve, or if that be unnecessary, at least to modify and expand his "sense of honor" in appropriate directions.

Now it is my conviction that the honor system is, or at least should be, one of the educative influences thus brought to bear on the immature student. This is possibly not the traditional conception of the nature and function of this institution. The traditional conception would seem to be that the honor system is essentially a regulative instrument, and, incidentally, a device for separating the sheep from the goats, or a sort of sieve for sifting out the good grain from the worthless chaff. The presupposition back of such a notion of the honor system is a static view of human nature, and more especially of those elements in human nature which constitute a "sense of honor." But for a college which pretends to be an educational institution to subscribe to a system of student control which itself makes no pretense to being educative in its effects, and for the college to deal with students as being immature or undeveloped with reference to knowledge and yet as being finished products with reference to morals, would seem to be, to say the least, a contradiction in terms.

And so I think we must conclude that the college is logically committed to the conception of the honor system as being essentially educative and not merely regulative (or shall we say eliminative?) in its intent and result. But what difference will this conception make in the administration of the honor system where it is consciously grasped and put into practice? In other words, how is the honor system to function as an institution whose aim it is to help create an environment which is favorable to the development of the sort of honor required of one who is to conform successfully to its code? Time will permit of only two or three suggestions in this connection as illustrations of the sort of measures which may be employed to accomplish the end I have described.

The first of those suggestions is that the freshman's acknowledgment and acceptance of the honor code can be made somewhat less perfunctory and mechanical than is usually the case. When a student matriculates in a college where the honor system is in operation, there

is an implied agreement on his part to uphold its standards. But this technicality might well be supplemented by a solemn and impressive ceremony, conducted by student representatives, on which occasion all new matriculates would be initiated into the honor system, as it were, taking upon themselves such vows in such terms as would be appropriate to the emotional and dramatic features of the situation. The psychological effect of a ceremony of this sort is obvious.

Another suggestion I have to make in this connection is that the publicity given by student officers and leaders to the standards embodied in the honor code can be made something more than perfunctory explanations and warnings. Too often such publicity aims only at putting the new student on notice, so to speak. The usual attitude seems to be something like this: Here are the ideals of the college community; let the new student take them or leave them,—along with the consequences! A rather formal sense of justice (and should we not add, something closely akin to smug self-righteousness?) requires that the inevitable delinquents, when once their violations of the honor code prove them to have been “devils from the beginning,” shall not be able to plead ignorance of the law. Hence the necessity of some sort of information concerning the honor system and its standards. But my contention is that this information can and should be conveyed in such a manner as to establish in the freshman’s mind associations and attitudes which will make his acceptance of the honor code something more than a meaningless technicality. Constructive publicity, then, as a substitute for perfunctory explanations and warnings is another way in which the honor system can be rendered truly educative in its effects.

And there are various other methods which might be employed with results equally good, such as a more discriminating and intelligent use of the “pledge”; and such as the use of corrective and constructive forms of punishment as opposed to those forms which aim only at vindicating and upholding the honor code and at ridding the college of its undesirable elements. Our time is passing, however, and I must hasten on.

There is another prevalent misconception of the honor system to which I wish to call your attention. It has to do with what we must regard as the very foundation of all student government, namely, personal responsibility; and it usually manifests itself in an unwillingness on the part of one student to assume responsibility for detecting and exposing the wrongdoing of another. What shall we say of such an attitude? Well, there are several things, it seems to me, which should be said with reference to it. For one thing we shall do well, I think, to

recognize how prevalent this attitude is. We shall also do well to recognize the sincerity of those who share it. Again we might as well face the fact that this is the point at which student government is most apt to break down. And, finally, it is important for us to realize that many of those who are opposed to the practice of informing on their fellows are able to give very definite, and, as they see it, very convincing reasons for the faith that is in them. After a thorough investigation, extending over two or more years, and conducted by means of personal inquiry among many students, I have come to the conclusion that those who are opposed to this principle of reporting the misconduct of others fall into a number of clearly marked off groups in accordance with the reasons they give for the position they take. I wish you to consider during the time which remains two or three of these reasons in order to determine, if possible, whether they have sufficient merit to justify the position taken with reference to it.

Some of these reasons are relatively superficial and need not, therefore, detain us. I refer to such contentions as that the principle of informing on others is unnecessary; or that it is extremely difficult and unpleasant; or that the punishment in which it results is too severe; or that the principle is inherently odious. An argument which is more serious and which merits more consideration is that the individual student is not responsible for exposing the misconduct of others because this duty has been delegated to a student council elected for this purpose and authorized, therefore, to act for the individual in this capacity. And in defense of this attitude, an appeal is usually made to the analogy which is said to exist between civil society and the college community. In civil society there are agencies whose sole duty it is to detect and expose wrongdoing. To be sure, the existence of such agencies does not absolve the individual from all moral, nor, indeed, from all legal, responsibility in this connection. That is to say, there are situations in which the individual citizen is neither morally nor legally free to refrain from reporting to the proper authorities the misconduct which comes under his observation. But on the whole, the welfare of society is best promoted where every citizen attends to his own business. To attend to one's own business, therefore, is under ordinary circumstances, an honorable trait so far as the citizen is concerned. Now the college community under the honor system is like civil society in a democratic state in that it sets up certain machinery through which it proposes to govern itself. It is unlike civil society, however (and here the analogy between the two breaks down) in that the personnel of its governmental machinery are not primarily policemen or judges, but are, on the contrary, students, who, in the nature of the case, cannot

be exclusively depended on to detect and expose wrongdoing. Theirs is the duty to investigate misconduct and to administer punishment in such cases as come under their personal observation, or such as are reported to them by others. For the most part the rank and file of the students themselves must be responsible for and take the initiative in holding to account those whose misconduct is dishonorable and thus strike at the foundations of college life.

The tradition that "to tell" is not an honorable thing to do has a more primitive basis, however, than this analogy between the college community and civil society. It reaches back into the earliest training of the individual as a member of the family and the elementary school. And, if I am not mistaken, it is this training which all of us get as members of the family and elementary school that accounts for the largest group of those students who are adverse to reporting the misconduct of others. And yet there is no analogy between these more elementary groups and the college community that justifies carrying over into the latter this tradition against concerning oneself with the wrongdoing of one's fellows. For, mind you, neither the family nor the elementary school pretends to be a self-governing body. On the contrary, authority is vested in parents and teachers, respectively. And on the whole parents and teachers find it easiest to administer their authority in an effective and equitable manner when there is a minimum of "spying" or "tattling". But in a college where student government prevails, students are in a large measure on their own responsibility and must, therefore, be prepared to take the initiative in upholding their honor code.

Let me hasten to remind you, however, that under the honor system the student is not required to "spy" or to "tattle" or to be a "busybody." He is merely required to report such cases of misconduct as come under his own observation while engaged in his own affairs. And he is not at liberty to withhold information of such violations of honor for the reason that this information rightfully belongs to the student council to whom he, as one who has elected to live under the honor system, has delegated the task of upholding the honor code. The fact that the knowledge in question was not gained as a result of any effort on his part, but, on the contrary, was stumbled on, so to speak, as one might pick up a purse lost by another, does not in any way affect his obligations in the matter. The knowledge is not his; it belongs to others. To keep it locked up in his own mind is no more defensible, morally, than it would be for one to pocket money he had found with no attempt to identify its rightful owner. And this is the

reason that, under the honor system, to refrain from reporting violations of the honor code is itself regarded as a breach of honor.

There is one other objection to the principle of personal responsibility, as conceived under the honor system, to which I wish to call your attention. There are many students who feel that to report or to threaten to report the misconduct of another is, in effect, to employ a degree of force which is strangely out of place in a system of control based on honor. The criticism I heard expressed most frequently at the recent Congress of the National Student Federation was "too much system and too little honor." Back of this criticism seemed to be a feeling that it is inconsistent to regard the standards of action included in the honor system as standards of honor when the practice of the standards, so far from being left entirely to the voluntary disposition of students, is in reality guaranteed by coercive measures of the most compelling kind. Has this attitude, with the criticism it implies, any weight? And how is one who is concerned to uphold the reasonableness of the honor system to meet it?

Well, it is possible that those who feel so sure that honor and coercion cannot be combined in any sort of system have overlooked or misconceived the real nature of group self-control, of which the honor system in college communities is a special case. Self-control by groups manifests itself in two forms, namely, in morality and in law. By morality is meant the control of the members of a group from within through personal ideals; and by law is meant the control of such individuals from without by means of legislative enactments enforced by agencies competent to inflict appropriate penalties for violations. But these two forms of social control, although distinct in their mode of operation, are by no means mutually exclusive. For neither is possessed of a sphere of action peculiar to itself, in which it operates to the exclusion of the other. On the contrary, the spheres of action in which they respectively operate overlap, so that a standard of action may be both a matter of morality and a matter of law. For example, driving an automobile at a reasonable (or legal) rate of speed on public highways is for some a personal ideal (as well as a law) and operates, so far as they are concerned, as an inner control; for others, however, it is merely a law imposed from without and enforced by extraneous penalties.

Now, the honor system combines within itself the two forms of control to which I have referred as morality and law, and also exhibits the overlapping of their respective spheres to which reference has been made. In other words, the honor system is, in reality, a combination of coercion and honor. And the standards of action embodied in

its code partake of the nature of both law and morality. For many students these standards are personal ideals which exercise an inner control. For such students the honor code is simply an announcement to the world of the principles they mean to live by in the interest of certain values, felt to be fundamental in college life. And in living up to this announcement, no coercion or restraint of any sort may be experienced. There is a small minority of students in every college, however, for whom the honor code is to all intents and purposes a legal enactment. Its standards, so far as these students are concerned, are not personal ideals; and the observance of these standards is not at all a matter of morality. For such students, on the contrary, the control exercised by these standards is entirely external, and is enforced by the decrees of a council with penal powers. And yet, the existence of such an external and coercive form of control within a system which proposes to effect a control of conduct primarily from within through a sense of honor is, as we have seen, neither unusual nor unreasonable. In a group, made up of such a diversity of moral types as compose the personnel of a college community, only such a combination of law and morality, coercion and honor, will suffice.

It must be obvious, however, that this conception of a group, some of whose members are so moral as to require no control save through their own ideals and others of whom are so lacking in morality as to require control altogether from without, is an undue simplification of the state of affairs actually existing in a college group, or in any other community. In all groups, including the college, the dividing line between the "good" and "bad," or between the "honorable" and the "dishonorable" is fluctuating and indistinct. The great mass of individuals fall somewhere between these moral extremes, either because their ideals are not sufficiently inclusive to serve all the vital interests of the group, or because these ideals, however inclusive they may be, are not vigorous enough to function always without some support and reinforcement from without. And even the best of us, if we are but honest enough to admit it, have our unfinished areas, our weak moments, or both. It may be, therefore, that we all need from time to time to be reminded lest we forget, to be enlightened lest we become confused, and to be made sober and steady in the face of what might otherwise cause us to falter. And the existence of law and law-like coercions affects us in just these ways. Indeed, the law has been one of the great educators of the human race, one of the schools, if you please, in which mankind's morality has been nurtured. There is a sense, to be sure, in which law may be said to represent the institutionalizing of morality. But the law has more than repaid the

debt it owes to the moral insight of the social genius in the nurture it has provided for the morality of the masses. And as an educative influence, it is as indispensable for the average individual of today as it was for the masses of individuals in primitive society.

The average college student, like any average individual, has his ideals and his convictions. But like any other average individual he is, with respect to goodness or character, an unfinished product. At college he associates himself with other immature persons. Together, he and they publish abroad the fact that they mean to live by certain principles. These principles constitute their code of honor. But immature and idealistic though they be, students realize that some of their number are without much appreciation of what they have agreed to regard as matters of honor, and that all of them appreciate some of these ideals but inadequately at best. They resolve, nevertheless, that these ideals shall be maintained, whatever penalties must be imposed to maintain them. Whereupon the honor code ceases to be a matter of morality alone, and becomes, in essence at least, a matter of law. But in the meantime no violence has been done to the spirit of morality. On the contrary, morality has, in reality, been supplemented and reinforced; supplemented for those who are more or less lacking in the inner sanctions of conduct, and reinforced for those the inner sanctions of whose conduct may be in need of that stimulus, enlargement, and support which come only from a subjection to discipline which is self-imposed.

